MEMORIALS OF ROBERT HUGH BENSON

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MEMORIALS OF ROBERT HUGH BENSON BY BLANCHE WARRE CORNISH, SHANE LESLIE & OTHER FRIENDS

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MEMORIALS OF ROBERT HUGH BENSON

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BY

BLANCHE WARRE CORNISH

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BY

SHANE LESLIE & OTHER OF HIS FRIENDS

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Mrs. Warre Cornish's contribution is reprinted, with revision, from the "Dublin Review."

ROBERT HUGH BENSON

BY BLANCHE WARRE CORNISH

I

AT the death of Robert Hugh Benson, in October 1914, the personal character of the sorrow for his loss was very manifest. It was towards the close of the month, in the hour of dreadful suspense when the long battle for Calais was beginning; preoccupation was intense, and English hearts were absorbed by our soldiers in the field. Little appeared in the papers about the young dignitary of the Church who had passed so suddenly away. And yet it was remarked that thousands who had never spoken to him mourned for him as for a relation.

Outside his own fold, brethren and friends of University life or of an early and successful Anglican pastorate were drawn to him by his courageous death in full consciousness—or by the amenities, and in

the case of his brothers the comradeship, of the very last years. "He was always a modest man, the Monsignor," said an impartial and gracious Cambridge voice in my hearing at the time; and an attractive writer in the *Cornhill Magazine* bears witness to friendship deepening with Robert Hugh Benson in latter years, in spite of divergent ways of thought. It appeared that old self-assertion had softened—the turgid waters of extreme opinion ran clearer.

Personal, too, was the nature of the regret in the Catholic world; it was not merely that Monsignor Benson had revived the great tradition of the pulpit—the success almost of Père Ravignan and Père Félix in France, witnessed by the crowds who waited to see the boy-like form and fair head appear in the pulpit; nor was it this book or that amid the marvel of his literary accomplishment: these counted for little at the hour of his death in comparison to the memory of his faith. No, something intimate, something consoling, was in the mind of each, at the passing of the great little priest. The spur of the Invisible was upon him in his death and in his life. Therefore he interpreted to men their own sorrow. He was a mystic: he taught that

mysticism, the vision and experience which comes in passivity and by silence—"a silence more articulate than words" as he wrote—was in the reach of the humblest. And a steady look at the man was needed. All that he gave to his contemporaries was the history of his conversion, that it might be useful to them. But there was never a word about his early life in the world, about his life as an artist in fiction. Soon we shall have many side-lights upon him, and ultimately the biography and letters promised by Father Martindale. It is here as a mystic, an Englishman who will take his place amongst the true mystics of the Church, that a few facts and souvenirs are put together with a permitted narrative of his life at home.

II

HUGH BENSON, as he was always formerly called, owed the name to his birthplace. His father was Chancellor of the Cathedral at Lincoln and lived in its splendid precincts, where his youngest child was born. The sanctity of St. Hugh of Lincoln inspired the father long before the son wrote his life and spread the fame of the Carthusian Order that he adorned. His first name of Robert was used by him when he first began to publish. From Lincoln the future Archbishop passed to Truro, where as Bishop he built the fine modern cathedral. Devoted to the wild Cornish country-side, where the Bishop's family made Kenwyn Vicarage their home, Hugh—always Hugh, as we have said, in his home, and Hugh for us in this narrative—first became known to me as the sheltered boy of a dignified and simple little ecclesiastical court within the walls of a country vicarage. It was much enlarged by, and received the name of Lis Escop from, Arch-

bishop Benson, whose episcopal life there reminded his successor of ideal primitive Christian days. At Lambeth Palace and Addington Park, the ancient houses of the English primates, the character of the family life changed little. A taste for the wild country found in Cornwall expanded into riding and shooting and wandering tastes at Addington; and the delicious topography of *By What Authority* owes its colour to an early acquaintance with historical country-sides between Tonbridge and Canterbury.

He went to Eton at thirteen as a scholar on the Foundation, easily winning the scholarship, but not following it up with any great University prize at Trinity, Cambridge, where he graduated. He lived for his friends, who looked upon him with great affection, and for no particular reason with great surprise. "When I was with him," explained one of them, "I felt that everything was touched with romance and importance." Nobody then had any idea of his gifts or of his power of work. It was only known vaguely that he had written an unpublished novel, and that he was enthusiastic. Also that he was devoted to music, and much occupied with the future of opera. He wrote a libretto—which was

to transform the art—with a friend, but it was never finished. His virtues and his shortcomings at that time were those of all young men of the upper classes who live in the open air and abhor pretensions to originality. But soon he was to find his vocation at Trinity. He had read rather desultorily for the Indian Civil Service, but he failed in the first part of the examination, and could not stand another year of cramming. Contrary to his family's expectations, he decided to read for Orders in the Church of England. After a year with the inspiring leader Dr. Vaughan, at the theological college of Llandaff, he was ordained Deacon by his father in 1894. He was drawn to the pastorate, and became at once known as a promising preacher in the famous Eton Mission of the East End of London: then he received his full English orders whilst still curate of the Mission, living in its settlement. So for two years the boyish form of Hugh Benson disappears into mean streets, crowded rooms, jam factories, amid a nomad population of 8000 souls; the population of the Eton Mission was said at that time to change every three years.

The whole tenor of mind of the young University man in his first pastorate after

theological reading is represented by the verses called "Christian Evidences":

NOW God forbid that Faith be built on dates,
Cursive or uncial letters, scribe or gloss,
What one conjectures, proves, or demonstrates:
This were the loss
Of all to which God bids that man aspire,
This were the death of life, quenching of fire.

Nay, but with Faith I see. Not even Hope,
Her glorious sister, stands so high as she.
For this but stands expectant on the slope
That leads where He
Her source and consummation sets His seat,
Where Faith dwells always to caress His Feet.

Nay, but with Faith I marked my Saviour go,
One August noonday, down the stifling street,
That reeked with filth and man; marked from Him flow
Radiance so sweet,
The man ceased cursing, laughter lit the child,
The woman hoped again, as Jesus smiled.

Two years and a half of the strain of East End work brought about Hugh Benson's first attack from overwork. Archbishop Benson died in 1896, and Hugh joined his family in Egypt, where they spent a winter for the health of a cherished sister. Of this stay Hugh recorded in the *Confessions of a Convert* that he received his first vivid impression of the visible Church.

He returned to England to take up pastorate work in the country, in a new curacy at Kemsing, Kent; here he became closely in touch with village people, and taught them to take great pleasure in the performance of religious plays. Then suddenly, in 1898, at the age of twenty-seven, the popular, the intensely English, the eager and excitable Hugh Benson entered the contemplative life at Mirfield with the Anglican "Community of the Resurrection." It was founded within the discipline of the Church of England by the present Bishop of Oxford, then Canon Gore. He was very happy there, though not, we understood, particularly disciplined, and with a humorous pencil drew pictures of minute monks of Mirfield with all the gestures of their well-ordered day.

I shall never forget, however, my surprise at learning that Hugh Benson was a monk. That he should have left the line of promotion with his East-end or his Kentish curacy had no share in the surprise, because the purity of his spiritual life was manifest in his preaching, and ambition had not been a motive power in any of his name. But I had absolutely no clue to his choice of the contemplative life in a community. He came into the room one day, about this time,

ROBERT HUGH BENSON IN 1906

unexpectedly, and threw himself into a chair with the exclamation, "Oh! *how* is H.?" He was living in the memory of Cambridge days, and "H." embodied them. Mirfield he quickly brought before my eyes,—hill-top buildings, from the windows of which was generally to be seen a pall of smoke. Below the pall was occasionally discovered, he said, a manufacturing town of the North. He did not help me to understand why he had chosen the hill-top. I had no knowledge then of the influence of men bound by the vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty, upon the toiling masses. I had heard wonders of his preaching and his young pastorate. Now he was spending three years and a half of the very strength of youth in preaching without any special call to the masses. He was thirty, and had not uttered any original thought.

With many others, I was at this point of nescience about the use of the contemplative Orders when I learnt about Hugh Benson's conversion in September 1903. In the following year I read the first utterance of his creative thought. It was in the form of an old priest's narrative of supernatural influences. And the book was to touch hearts. It was to reveal his art, and make men want to verify the life described.

But if I had had *The Light Invisible* in my hands at that time, I should not yet have understood his need for solitude, his individual vision; it was only later, and with her who was "the heart and hinge" of all her son's love of home, that I learnt to know more of his—and of his mother's—sympathy with the contemplative life. It is necessary to speak of her.

It is well known that Monsignor Benson's mother received, in earliest girlhood, the education of a man, and that she was the only sister of a brilliant band of brothers, of whom Henry Sidgwick, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge, had lasting fame. With a great household to care for, from very young married days, she taught her own clever sons. When Mrs. Benson lost her finely endowed eldest son at seventeen, already a great scholar at Winchester, she was drawn very near to the Unseen. She had ever been her husband's adviser; in the hour of trial she was the inspiration of the mourning home.

Her firm Christian faith had not been formed without deep inquiry. The most intellectual age of the world and its philosophic influences had affected her in youth. But in a difficult time she preserved a dogmatic faith which was whole-hearted,

and therefore useful to others as well as to herself. Mrs. Benson never wrote. Her gifts of converse and sympathy were fed by a great power of inward silence. She set much store on meditation, and practised it all through her active life at Lambeth. Her youngest son's first call to the contemplative life did not surprise his mother. She personally knew its worth.

In the secluded home in Sussex, which was hers after the Archbishop's death, an expanded view of Catholic devotion was welcomed by her. Monsignor Benson has related the story of his conversion. I am writing without any book, but I think his first words following on his discovery of Truth were : " I went to my mother."

In her house, and at her side, the intervening time was spent which elapsed between his farewell to Mirfield and his reception into the Church, which was quickly followed by his novitiate for the priesthood in Rome. The interval was about six months. And the young preacher, already known to the world as one of the best in the Church of England, spent a time of silence. There is a path in his mother's garden at Tremans known as the Priest's Walk. An ancient wooden crucifix is set there by the owner of the house, amid many

sheltering yews. The Breviary was said here, and certain of the *Poems* written, the simple overflowings of a full heart. This was in 1903, when he decided not to renew his vows at Mirfield.

III

AT Tremans, in the whole vision of the Catholic Church and its impress from its Founder, in undisturbed silence, and with the fertilising influence of sympathy in his home, he began to produce with extraordinary fertility. He was thirty-two when he wrote *The Light Invisible*. He had broken from controversy like a young lion, and henceforth stood for all that was positive in spiritual teaching.

The historical novel, *By What Authority*, was written there almost without books. The Great Keynes of the story, which is full of the charm of Sussex names and roads of fame in Tudor days, when Linfield was a deer forest, is the pleasant group of farm cottages and the church and the green within sight of the South Downs to-day. It was once a bustling village filled with news of the Great Armada. Tremans is the Dower House of the story, where the noble priest hero came to his vocation.

But the quiet catechumen days gave place

to a long novitiate in the burning heats of Rome, where no seclusion could be found from fashionable society. The cynic that Hugh Benson might very easily have become in his hatred of social banalité was here tested. But we need not dwell on what is so evident to students of his novels: in that respect he never quite attained the "wise indifference of the wise" or learnt the "scorn of scorn" of the greatest natures. At the time, I was more conscious of another lack—indifference to the great arts of painting and sculpture at their highest. Music was the only art he recognised. How well I remember the answer to my first eager question about the Italian stay. "Were not Rome and Italy a perfect delight?" No, indeed! he was only impatient to escape and get back to England. I recalled to him, a thorough Englishman from boyhood, his delight in *John Inglesant* when at Eton. That inconclusive romance took the reader to Italy, and found the counterpart to its aspiration in the churches and art of Italy. I did not anticipate what a John Bull he was to remain.

The Religion of a Plain Man and *The Letters of a Pariah* give us the exact value set by Hugh on forms, ceremonies, and the outward things of the Church. "They

are just nothing at all," said an Irish nun to me once. She also was a true mystic. To Robert Hugh Benson the visible forms, of course, were essential as soon as the inner life was grasped, and they were also a strong help to the inner life: but he was too much of an Englishman, and he understood the thoughts and ways of Englishmen too well, ever to confuse Truth with æsthetic contemplation. His novitiate in Rome lasted, I think, a year, and then in the Spring, 1904, began his life of ever-increasing energy—preaching, writing without pause for measuring his success, neglecting effect—"he was not out for fame but for souls," wrote of him a Franciscan monk. He interviewed and directed his countrymen and Americans. His American tours should make a chapter in themselves. I hope we shall learn much of them.

The editing and prefacing of books which he thought useful to souls was a work charged with his message. To take one instance, his Preface to the *Modern Pilgrim's Progress*, the book of a convert who died in the same month as himself. It sent her highly philosophical message, so well pointed and carefully fashioned, like an arrow from the bow when it is directed by a powerful hand. Then his lecturing must

A. C. BENSON, R. H. BENSON, AND E. F. BENSON, 1907

also be passed over with only one mention. The lecture on Lourdes, delivered in 1914, so memorable for all who heard it, was no mere outcome of vivid impressions gathered at the Grotto, but the result of long balancing and undoing of prejudice created by his horror that men should become Catholics for the sake of regaining their health; fears clearly expressed to me in 1906, but afterwards dropped when he had himself visited Lourdes and seen how the Church safeguards it from such abuse.

IV

IN 1907 Monsignor Benson made at Hare Street, Hertfordshire, a retreat for himself. The ancient house and village stand within one hour of London by rail, thirty miles by the old posting roads of Bishopsgate and Ware. We have his own description of it in *Oddsfish:*

The house without was of timber and plaster, very solidly built, but in no way pretentious. There was a little passage as we came in, and to right and left lay the Great Chamber (as it was called) and the dining-room. It is strange how some houses, upon a first acquaintance with them, seem like old friends; and how others, though one may have lived in them fifty years, are never familiar to those who live in them. Now Hare Street House was one of the first kind. This very day that I first set eyes on it, it was as if I had lived there as a child. The sunlight streamed into the Great Chamber, and past the yews into the parlour; and upon the lawns outside; and the noise of the bees in the limes was as if an organ played softly; and it was all to me as if I had known it a hundred years.

And so it was chosen as a country house to be enjoyed for a few days in the week, when every week-end was given to preaching in all parts of Great Britain, chiefly in the North; and week days were devoted to missions and to the direction of souls.[1] For some years the house was shared with a doctor friend, a Catholic who was much interested in modern psychical healing. A house was built for Miss Lyall, the daughter of Sir Alfred Lyall, who was a useful critic of the historical novels written at Hare Street.

The chapel of the house was an old brew-house; its crucifix was carved in the house by the owner. It was possible for the two busy men at Hare Street to escape the obsession of detail which is such a snare to the novelist and to the man of science. There was work in the gardens and the orchard—it is a largish demesne, about four or five acres. There was wholesome manual work in the carving shop, which enriched the chapel with carvings: when was the contemplative life not safeguarded by the labour of the hands? Music was never neglected by Monsignor Benson; his writings

[1] Monsignor Benson's excellent factotum at Hare Street gives the average of days spent by his master there as two or three in the week; he was once at Hare Street for three weeks.

are full of it. But it is touching to learn that it was in the hour of pain and exhaustion from ceaseless work and long overstrain that he made choice of a Bechstein grand piano. A pianist friend was to bring Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach into his home. Nor was private correspondence with friends—always brief but eager—wanting. "Such various friendships—such evidences of zest and interest and *fun* on his side, and of gratitude and affection on the part of the recipients, short little correspondences, too, —opening away like corridors. . . ." Such was the description of Hugh's correspondence given me by his eldest brother and most faithful executor.

My own share of it was in connection with the work of Hugh Benson's dear friend, Norman Potter, whose Boys' Homes had grown up since their first friendship when they were converts of the same year—they were led to the goal by totally opposite ways. We were selling books and authors' autographs for the Homes, but oddly enough he gave us no books and was very chary of his autograph. I had read poems of his at Tremans, written in the interval of 1903—*The Halt* names that period in one poem; and I asked if the Tremans poems, as they always were named by me—

breathing the peace of the place—could be printed for the benefit of the Homes. The answer was almost a cry from Hugh Benson, to the effect that poetry seemed a far-off thing in his present busy life: he should never write any more: Norman Potter was welcome to any that his mother could find at Tremans, but he was not to be consulted about their publication—the urgent business of his days made poetry seem remote from him. With what fine literary welcome, and with what generous issue for the Homes, the poems have been published, is manifest in England and in America.

V

AND then, in the very thick of the warm charities of life, a sudden silence made itself around him who had ever taught the lessons of solitude. In a densely populated city, on a mission to thousands of poor Irish Catholics, the sudden final silence came. The Church received, in the first bereft and sorrowing hour, the restrained and impressive narrative of Monsignor Benson's death from the priest who attended him. But we must go a little further back in the summer of unparalleled events before we come to the narrative of Canon Sharrock of Salford, the town in which Monsignor Benson died. Hugh Benson spent the first week of August after the declaration of war with his mother and with his two brothers and Miss Tait, their great friend, in the peace of Tremans. A feature of the house should be mentioned here, with the last meeting of mother and son. Mrs. Benson had, in the early days of her son's Roman orders, devoted a room to his use as a

chapel. Here, with the permission of her own ecclesiastical authorities and his, an altar was brought, and Mass said when he was in the house. (It was not said at Tremans in his absence.) The young men associated with Hugh Benson generally found Mass at Tremans at the great feasts, and a kind welcome from the owner of the house. It is of the Christmas morning of 1904, when a friend riding or driving over from Ashdown Forest saw the lights of the chapel shining across the deep lane, and heard Mass, and afterwards received that kind welcome, that I have the most vivid impression. Surely the last Mass said there in August 1914 will have brought a blessing on the house which was the last meeting place of mother and priest-son.

In the end of August, absorbed by the suspense before Mons, and then the stupendous news of ceaseless fighting, and stirred to the depths by his country's unity and heroism, Monsignor Benson began to compile the little volume named *Vexilla Regis*. The ancient hymn had furnished a noble title—The Standard of the King. The volume contains devotions for each day of the week, following the ecclesiastical order; and the choice of daily chapters shows Monsignor Benson's affinity with the

AT HARE STREET HOUSE, 1909

prophetic character of the sublime Scriptures, which possibly never have sounded so solemnly and consolingly as in the most modern and most terrible war of the world. But he was not to correct the proofs of *Vexilla Regis;* he was not to know the issue of the battle for Calais. He was to leave the world of strife: the world of peace was to come suddenly in sight.

Hugh Benson, according to the testimony of the one who knew him the best, had always wished to die young, and "to pass swiftly after living intensely." But when illness came, he resisted it. In early September came the alarm. Attacks of violent neuralgia of the heart made his family anxious: consultations were held with doctors at the evidence of overwork. He was ordered to rest, and agreed to go abroad in late autumn. But meanwhile he worked. And he had at heart to preach two more Missions, one in a very humble church. At the obscure Ulverstone, a suburb of Manchester, from October 5th to 11th, he preached between the attacks of pain and once in acute pain, so that there were pauses in the sermon and the congregation waited motionless. The Mission at Salford followed, and of this attempt, and of the noble struggle with pain, Canon Sharrock of

Salford Cathedral is the witness in a widely known narrative. Monsignor Benson suddenly recognised himself to be very ill: characteristically he threw himself into a motor car, ostensibly to seek further advice in London from doctors, but with a strong instinct, all who knew him may imagine, to reach his brethren and his home.

But it was not to be. Pain pursued. He was brought back and laid in the Bishop's library on his return to Bishop's House at Salford, where he was to die. Here Canon Sharrock relates how pneumonia supervened, and how, on Saturday, October 17, 1914, he warned Monsignor Benson of his danger:

> He received the last rites with great devotion, and all unbidden made his profession of faith with marked strength and vivacity. Sunday morning saw a change, after a restless night which had tried the endurance of both doctor and nurse. He was never delirious, but his restlessness was acute. On Sunday morning I gave him Holy Viaticum. His piety and devotion were most touching. He made all the responses, even correcting me when my emotion caused me to stumble at the *Misereatur*. On Sunday morning he received a visit from his brother (Mr. Arthur C. Benson), which gave him great pleasure. He even then informed me that he would be quite well by Tuesday, "though," he added, "this hard breathing is a terrible bore." His mental faculties were as keenly active as ever, and no tendency to mental exhaustion was observ-

able. His strength appeared good, but it was only too evident that the terrible strain on the heart from pneumonia was beginning to tell. Later on, in the evening, for the first time, I abandoned hope. He spoke continuously to me of his friends, and gave me his many messages.

At one o'clock on Monday morning, having left him for a short time, I was hastily summoned by the nurse, at his request. Entering the sick room, I saw that the last call had come. He told me so himself, with the words, "God's will be done." He bade me summon his brother, who was in the adjoining apartment. The prayers for the dying were recited, and again he joined in the responses, clearly and distinctly. Once, when I paused, he bade me in God's name to go on. He stopped the prayers twice or thrice to give some instructions to his brother. He asked once for guidance as to the right attitude towards death. Once, as I paused, he uttered the prayer, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul," and joined with us in its completion. Conscious almost to the last moment, seemingly without pain, he breathed forth his soul without struggle at 1.30 A.M. on Monday morning. With his eyes fixed on the priest he died; it was just as if he had gone to sleep.

Who but a faithful priest could express for us the final solitude, which the true mystic is ever prepared for;—

> In such an hour
> Of visitation from the living God
> Sound was there none, nor any sense of joy;
> Thought was not, with enjoyment it expired.

But perfect consciousness was left, and no dying act of faith—more precious in the sight of God than the transports of the soul—was omitted.

Mr. Arthur Benson wrote to me of those moments. His letter breathes lofty sympathy with all who strain loving eyes to follow a leader to the verge of the far horizons, and he has permitted me to quote what he wrote shortly after :

His death was very wonderful. He was conscious till within a few minutes of the end—indeed, from the time I came to him (on being summoned) to the last breath was only a few minutes—he spoke several times and joined eagerly in the prayers—but the thing for which I am most thankful is that he was so entirely and wholly *himself*—brave, considerate and, I might say, *adventurous*. It was simply as though he had left the room, when he died—no sense of *death*, only of life passing on.

Some day I shall hope to tell you more, but I cannot do more now ; I felt you would like just to know this.

It is the voice of a sincere and individual interpreter of life that speaks to us in this letter. Mr. Arthur Benson fitly closes our retrospect. He is qualified to interpret the original movements, the elemental character, the *himself* of that burning soul.

And Mr. Arthur Benson has given us a word that lifts up. "He was entirely and wholly *himself*." Yes, individuality is a link with the world beyond the grave. And when was Hugh Benson not true to himself? "To thine own self be true" is a high command. A change of religion implies no remoulding of our faculties and reflected impulses. There are converts who would make us think otherwise. But he was so much himself that the religious biographer will find his task unusually difficult. His was the nature that cracks and breaks the mould that would enclose it stamped with a known pattern. True, his whole Catholic life was the logical response to a strong objective without. But he has *verified*—his great word—in Nature and in the supernatural what came to him as Truth. In his death this true mystic touchingly verified the struggle between them of which he so often wrote.

VI

IT is not our purpose to speak of Monsignor Benson's books as a whole. We cannot attempt to estimate the strength of the cairn of historical novels which we have from his hand dealing with the history of Recusancy in England, the top stone of which is *Oddsfish*. Sufficient to remember in passing that Robert Hugh Benson conquered *The Times*. To our astonishment we read in its review of *Come Rack, Come Rope*, in the autumn of 1912, the words, "Why do Englishmen ignore the history of Catholic Recusancy in their near past? It is such a noble page of the history of England."

As to the novels dealing with our own day, we have even less power of judging their durability. He wrote them for his own times and his own people. Many a man in society has said to himself in reading his portraits of *Conventionalists*, *Sentimentalists* or *Cowards*, "This is me," and has directed his life afresh. But we are looking for instances to illustrate what we have seen

of a deep and true, though plain and unexaggerated, mystic. We must leave aside *Richard Raynal*, which is the most artistic of all Monsignor Benson's books. It has suggestions penetrating and suave, like the hints of an invisible world in the pilgrimage of Bunyan. But it is so mediæval that it might have been written with a purely artistic purpose. He was, as a fact, full of his message. But he was apt at seizing many forms equally well suited to deliver it. In the *Papers of a Pariah* he speaks as a child of Nature about to be reconciled to the Church. We choose the following passages, because they show us a soul very attentive to Nature at the outset in searching for an interpretation of life and death. Nature was the schoolmaster to bring him to the Church.

We take a realistic description of a poor paralytic's sordid death chamber:

> Here was a chess-board of black and white, of suffering and sweetness, the dying man and the windless morning and the air like warm wine, soft and invigorating, and over all the tender vault of blue skeined with clouds. And what right have I to say that the board is essentially white and only accidentally black? If it were I who were dying, should I not feel that agony was the truth of it all and peace no more than an occasional incident?

IN HIS GARDEN, 1911
Photograph by Miss C. Chichester

But the dying man was a Catholic, and the poor soul with scarce a glimmer of sense received the last Sacraments at the hands of the Priest, and the witness, who was not yet reconciled to the Church, wrote :

> It appears to me that my first reflections on the tragedy and heartlessness of death were those of a stupid savage. . . . Death now no longer seemed to me a sickening horror. . . . It was as if, after a couple of harsh notes had been struck on some instrument, notes of brutal irreconcilable contrasts, another had been added to them which resulted in a solemn sweet chord. There was no longer that shrieking inconsistency between the mellow day outside and the death-sweat pains within ; it was no longer true that a Lord of Love held Himself apart in some sunny Heaven and tossed this heart-breaking problem down into a venomously cruel world ; it was all one now : He held both in the hollow of His Arms against His quiet Heart, in a span so vast that I could not follow it, but in an embrace so warm that I was no longer chilled.

In *None Other Gods* we have the mature expression of Monsignor Benson's individual beliefs ; we may sum them up thus. First, in the silent inward revelation ; secondly, in supernatural influences veiled by, though latent in, Nature ; finally, in the power of the forms of the Church to bring not æsthetes but sinners and sufferers to freedom, because they are divinely instituted.

The story is of a typical undergraduate of Trinity, Cambridge, who is an eldest son and takes his father's threat of disinheriting him for a change of religion, literally, by *simplifying* himself like the Russian nihilists, and, half gipsy, half ascetic, takes to a wandering life. He adopts an English major who has fallen from respectability, and the young woman adopted by the major, and for good English humour this sketch is worthy of Stevenson. The wanderers, who get their livelihood on farms, find themselves in the laboratory of a scientist, a dogmatic materialist, who believes in nothing but toxins. Toxin can do everything, said this enthusiast, and, sure enough, it cures the Poverello—as Frank Guiseley has by this time become—of tetanus.

Here is a problem not known in the *Fioretti*. But we are reminded of the spirit of St. Francis. The ardour of love that was in Frank was manifested first to the doctor's manservant and then to the doctor in a mysterious effluence from the patient. He worked upon them. One enthusiast had met another: the doctor had found a positive opposing power in his patient: a sense of intimacy unparalleled in the scientist's life was felt for Frank: he had met a human soul, an indestructible spirit.

The views of the mystics on Nature are defined: they give up the pagan joy in Nature, to receive Nature back again in the sense of underlying spirit. No theory comes from Robert Hugh Benson. But here is a description which must appeal to all who feel the objective truth and reality behind Nature.

Frank slept deeply and well, half waking once, however, at that strange moment of the night when the earth turns and sighs in her sleep, when every cow gets up and lies down again. He was conscious of a shrill crowing, thin as a bugle, from some farmyard out of sight; then he turned over and slept again.

When he awoke it was dawn. . . . Certainly he was a little stiff when he moved, but there was a kind of interior contentment . . . that caused that not to matter.

After a minute or two he sat up, felt about for his shoes and slipped them on. Then he unwound the wrapping about his neck, and crept out of the shelter.

It was that strange pause before the dawn when the light has broadened so far as to extinguish the stars. . . . Everything was absolutely motionless about him. . . . The dew lay soaking and thick on the grass slopes. . . . The silence and the solemnity of the whole seemed to him extraordinary. There was not a leaf that stirred—each hung as if cut of steel; there was not a bird which chirped nor a distant cock that crew; rabbits eyed him not twenty yards away, unafraid in this hour of truce.

It seemed to him like some vast stage on to which he had wandered unexpectedly. The performance of the day before had been played to an end, the night scene-shifting was finished, and the players of the new eternal drama were not yet come. An hour hence they would be all about: the sounds would begin again; men would cross the field-paths. . . . But at present the stage was clear—swept, washed, clean and silent.

It was the solemnity then that impressed him most—solemnity and an air of expectation. Yet it was not mere expectation. There was *a suggestion of the fundamental and the normal*, as if perhaps movement and sound were, after all, no better than interruptions; as if there were some great secret actually present and displayed in dead silence and invisibility, before those only who possessed the senses necessary to perceive it.

We follow the wanderers to a farm, a prison, and then to a great Benedictine monastery—of forty men—on All Hallows' E'en. The outcome was:

. . . *an extract, taken by permission, from a few pages of Frank Guiseley's diary. These pages were written with the encouragement of Dom Hildebrand Maple, O.S.B., and were sent to him later at his own request.*

". . . He told me a great many things that surprised me. For instance, he seemed to know all about certain ideas that I had. . . .

"I went to confession to him on Friday morning, in the church. He did not say a great deal then, but he asked if I would care to talk to him after-

wards. I said I would, and went to him in the parlour after dinner. The first thing that happened was that he asked me to tell him as plainly as I could anything that had happened to me—in my soul, I mean—since I had left Cambridge. So I tried to describe it.

"I said that at first things went pretty well in my soul, and that it was only bodily things that troubled me—getting fearfully tired and stiff, being uncomfortable, the food, the sleeping, and so on. Then, as soon as this wore off I met the Major and Gertie. I was rather afraid of saying all that I felt about these; but he made me, and I told him how extraordinarily I seemed to hate them . . . how I felt almost sick now and then when the Major talked to me and told me stories. . . . The only relief was that I knew that I *could*, as a matter of fact, chuck them whenever I wanted and go home again. But this relief was taken away from me as soon as I understood that I had to keep with them, and do my best somehow to separate them. Of course, I must get Gertie back to her people some time, and till that's done it's no good thinking about anything else.

"After a while, however—I think it was just before I got into trouble with the police—I began to see that I was a conceited ass for hating the Major so much. It was absurd for me, I said, to put on airs, when the difference between him and me was just that he had been brought up in one way and I in another. . . .

"Then I began to see that I had done absolutely nothing of any good whatever—that nothing had *really* cost me anything; and that the things I

was proud of were simply self-will—my leaving Cambridge, and all the rest. They were theatrical, or romantic, or egotistical; there was no real sacrifice. I should have minded much more not doing them. I began to feel extraordinarily small. . . .

"I was getting all wrong with regard to the Major and myself, and I had just begun to see that I must do something that my whole soul hated if it was to be of any use. Then there came that minute in the barn when I heard the police were after us. . . ." [Frank went to prison for the Major.] "I couldn't be proud of it ever because the whole thing was so mean and second-rate. . . ." [The girl to whom Frank was engaged took exception to the prison and threw him over.] . . . Simply everything was altered. Religion, of course, seemed no good at all. I don't understand quite what people mean by 'consolations' of religion. Religion doesn't seem to me a thing like Art or Music, in which you can take refuge. It either covers everything, or it isn't religion. Religion never has seemed to me (I don't know if I'm wrong) one thing, like other things, so that you change about and back again. . . . It's either the background and foreground all in one, or it's a kind of game. It's either true, or it's a pretence.

"Well, all this, in a way, taught me it was absolutely true. Things wouldn't have held together at all unless it was true. But it was no sort of satisfaction. It seemed to me for a while that it was horrible that it was true; that it was frightful to think that God could be like that—since this Jenny-business had really happened. . . . One thing, however, Father Hildebrand thought very

important (he asked me about it particularly) was that I honestly did not feel any resentment whatever against either God or Jenny. . . . I just had to lie still inside and look at it. He tells me that this shows that the first part of the 'process,' as he called it, was finished (he called it the 'Purgative Way'). And I must say that what happened next seems to fit in rather well.

"The new 'process' began quite suddenly when I awoke in the shepherd's hut one morning at Ripon. . . . I saw suddenly that what had been wrong in me was that I had made myself the centre of things, and God a kind of circumference. When He did or allowed things, I said, 'Why does He?'—*from my point of view*. That is to say, I set up my ideas of justice and love and so forth, and then compared His with mine, not mine with His. And I suddenly saw—or, rather, I knew already when I awoke—that this was simply stupid. Even now I cannot imagine why I didn't see it before: I had heard people say it, of course—in sermons and books—but I suppose it had meant nothing to me. (Father Hildebrand tells me that I had seen it intellectually, but had never embraced it with my will.) Because when one once really sees that, there's no longer any puzzle about anything. One can simply never say 'Why?' again. The thing's finished.

"Now this 'process' (as Father H. calls it) has gone on in a most extraordinary manner ever since. That beginning near Ripon was like opening a door into another country, and I've been walking ever since and seeing new things. All sorts of things that I had believed as a Catholic—things,

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I mean, which I assented to simply because the Church said so—have, so to speak, come up and turned themselves inside out. I couldn't write them down, because you can't write these things down, or even put them intelligibly to yourself. You just *see that they are so.* . . . Well, all this is what Father H. calls the 'Illuminative Way,' and I think I understand what he means. It came to a sort of point on All Souls' Eve at the monastery. I saw the whole thing then for a moment or two, and not only Purgatory. . . . And Father H. tells me that I must begin to look forward to a new 'process'—what he calls the 'Way of Union.' I don't understand much what he means by that; I don't see that more could happen to me; there has seemed a sort of lull for the last day or two—ever since All Souls' Day, in fact."

All Souls' Vigil in the Benedictine monastery revealed to Frank the use of the ceremonies of the Church.

"We're singing Matins of the Dead, presently," Father Hildebrand said in a low voice. "It's All Souls' Eve. Will you stay, or shall I take you to your room?"

"I'll stay, if I may," said Frank.

Half an hour later the ceremony began.

Here, I simply despair of description. I know something of what Frank witnessed and perceived, for I have been present myself at this affair in a religious house; but I do not pretend to be able to write it down.

First, however, there was the external, visible,

audible service: the catafalque, a bier-like erection, all black and yellow, guarded by yellow flames on yellow candles—the grave movements, the almost monstrous figures, the rhythm of the ceremonies, and the wail of the music of forty voices singing as one—all that I understood. . . .

But the inner side of these things—the reverse of which these things are but a coarse lining, the substance of which is a shadow, that is what passes words and transcends impressions.

It seemed to Frank that one section, at any rate, of that enormous truth at which he had clutched almost blindly when he had first made his submission to the Church—one chamber in that House of Life—was not flung open before him. . . .

It was the catafalque that seemed to him the veiled door to that other world that so manifested itself—seen as he saw it in the light of the yellow candles it was as the awful portal of death itself; beneath that heavy mantle lay not so much a Body of Humanity still in death, as a Soul of Humanity alive beyond death, quick and yet motionless with pain. And those figures that moved about it, with censor and aspersorium, were as angels for tenderness and dignity and undoubted power. They were men like himself, yet they were far more; and they, too, one day, like himself would pass beneath that pall and need the help of others that should follow them. . . .

Something of this is but a hint of what Frank experienced; it came and went, no doubt, in gusts, yet all through he seems to have felt that here was a door into that great watching world beyond—that here, in what is supposed by the world to be

the narrow constraint of religion, was a liberty and an outlook into realities such as the open road and nature can but seldom give.

We have chosen the above passages because they are most typical of a creative mind which never came to its expression at all till the sense within of mysterious grace was met, as in Frank's case, by a strong objective without.

AT Hare Street, on his death, were found Monsignor Benson's wishes about the burial of his body. The grave is in the orchard at Hare Street. On October 23, the day of the burial, was the Requiem, and the most exquisite art of the sixteenth century was heard in the Mission Chapel of the old house near Buntingford—Palestrina and his contemporaries sung by the great choir of our choir-loving age. The music of the Requiem echoed over the lime-bordered lawn, where a large group of friends stood, unable to find places in the chapel. The words of one very near to him describe the rite within: "You can't think how sustaining we found those great and simple Rites with which he was committed to God."

THE CAMBRIDGE APOSTOLATE

THE CAMBRIDGE APOSTOLATE

BY SHANE LESLIE

I

AMONG the few though pathetic references to Robert Hugh Benson in the well-stored biography of his father, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is an account of his once walking with a friend from Cambridge to Lambeth in the course of a single day. The return journey, back from Lambeth to Cambridge, viâ Rome, proved a longer and a lonelier progress. Nevertheless, after many toils and travels, he found himself in Cambridge again, by the Pope's favour a fully-fledged priest as early as 1904, but without "the faculties," which his rapid advance in ecclesiastical Orders did not permit in the eyes of his Diocesan. As in the celebrated case of Cardinal Manning, the first and necessary step after the Ordination was to take up his theological studies. Accord-

ingly, he had obtained Archbishop Bourne's permission to spend the next year of his life, not in a seminary, but under the congenial roof of Monsignor Barnes, antiquary, ex-artillery officer, convert, and chaplain to Catholic undergraduates at Cambridge.

The three silent terms which he spent at Llandaff House—the ancient Cambridge residence of an absentee Bishop of that See—were not the least strenuous of his life, though he was comparatively unknown. The splash of his conversion no longer eddied the *Church Times*. A first rumour, that he had been sent by the Inquisition to Cambridge ostensibly for his holidays but intentionally to pervert the evangelic youth, died down, for he loyally obeyed his Archbishop's injunction not to practise the pastoral side of theology before he had acquired the doctrinal. He did no more than rejoin old College societies like the *Decemviri*—a species of Club for male "blue-stockings"—but he seemed to afford only another instance of the pious obscurity to which Rome relegates her newly initiated. Still he was testing and perfecting himself all the while. At 8.30 every morning he said his Mass in the old ballroom of the Bishop of Llandaff—a situation that was not

ROBERT HUGH BENSON IN 1907
Photograph by Basevi

lost on his sense of humour. The remainder of the day he spent reading theology and laboriously compiling his early books. *The Light Invisible* was already on many Anglican shelves. He was now engrossed in writing *The Queen's Tragedy* and *The Mirror of Shalott*, though they were not published till later. The Catholic ghost stories of *The Mirror of Shalott* were read when written to the superintendent of his studies, who declined to offer encouragement. But when he retailed them by firelight in the rooms of undergraduates, his success was enormous. His only rival was the Provost of King's, whose *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* were being read to nervous listeners at the time. During the daylight he made no appearances except for meals, which he ate in self-imposed silence. In the evenings he used to discuss his past and probe wonderingly into the future. For regular parish combat he felt no particular ability. The Battle of Books lured him.

He had not yet developed the literary powers which he hoped some original-minded Ordinary would allow him to exert as a free-lance. In one of his most sanguine moments, he designed a kind of religious Hostel for cranks of every religious and

artistic tendency, for nothing less than the great Order of the Misunderstood. His associates in this enterprise were to live a semi-Carthusian existence, each writing or painting in his proper cell, and only meeting in the chapel or the central hall, which, for the benefit of the weaker brethren, was to be furnished with a music gallery. His chief reason for taking so feverishly to literature was in order to raise the necessary funds for this scheme. "For I am thirty-three already," he used to say, "and nobody writes anything after he is forty"—an opinion which his host controverted, but in vain. Hugh Benson knew that his life's work would be largely finished by the time he was forty. It was the span of life he had set himself to live.

II

A YEAR of hard work and of dreaming came to an end, and Father Benson offered himself to the Rector of Cambridge in the capacity of a new Curate. With Monsignor Scott must always lie the credit of launching him as a preacher and missioner. He had the foresight to see in the applicant a valuable link between the University and the Mission; and, in spite of the flutter of surprise which was felt in the Diocese, he accepted him. The local objections were twofold: on the part of the Catholics, who felt certain that Father Benson could not know enough theology, and on the part of Anglicans, who were afraid he knew too much. It was queried whether Monsignor Scott had shown a laudable taste in accepting the service of one who had preached as a parson in Cambridge a bare two years previously. But the kindly old man knew his choice, and right well was his paternal care repaid in the years to come. On one occasion

only had he cause to point out a dubious point of theology in one of his protégé's sermons, for he always made a point of hearing and enjoying them himself. "Then I will never preach theological sermons again," cried Benson; and he never did. It was in October 1905 that he launched himself on the mission he had carefully planned during his year of study and reflection. He had become convinced of the irreligious and materialistic atmosphere of Cambridge, which, he used to complain, weighed upon him like lead, and he had made up his mind to lift his thin but denunciatory voice at the gates of that mathematical city. To association and atmosphere he was always as sensitive as an artist to line and colour, and he used to say that it was the unseen pressure of materialism which finally drove him out of Cambridge.

Nevertheless he did stout battle against her fogs while he was there. His berth resembled that of a consul in foreign parts who is suspected of trying to naturalise the natives surreptitiously. He was not recognised properly by Town or by Gown, though he stood in relations to both. He was as far removed from the broad spirit of University thought as from the petty parochialism of the locality. As the self-

appointed champion, though not the official representative, of Rome in the capital of East Anglican Puritanism, his position became naturally isolated. It was a pity that his literary wrestlings with Tudorism never allowed him to deal historically with the Cromwellianism of which Cambridge was the cradle. Nevertheless he scented the old Round-headed and Iron-sided mysticism in the watered form of a Christianity which was alternately " revivalist " or " muscular." It was the conviction that he was up against the ramparts of English Protestantism that lent his early sermons their vim—and, it must be added, their vindictiveness. Suddenly, and without warning, a quavering but fearless voice was heard crying in the Cambridge desert, criticising every chink in the Anglican armour and testifying most whole-heartedly to the supreme excellences of the Bishop of Rome. The situation was sufficiently piquant to send ripples down the stationary backwaters of collegial existence.

The religion of the normal undergraduate at that date was exactly hit off by him when he wrote : " To be a professed unbeliever was bad form—it was like being a little Englander or a Radical ; to be pious was equally bad form—it resembled a

violent devotion to the Union Jack." On the whole, he probably acted as much as a tonic as an antidote to the Established Creed. Certainly, when he left Cambridge, Anglican lethargy was a thing of the past. His sermons lay under two categories—the mystical and the controversial. The former were certainly the more soothing, especially his wonderful treatment of the Water and Wine at Cana, which lingered in the memory long after his Petrine shafts had broken against each other. Not that he failed to be effective after the manner of any bold bowman, but that he more often left the sting of exasperation than the wound of conviction amongst his Anglican hearers. Doubtless it was intensely annoying to be told that if St. Peter did not wear a tiara, it was equally difficult to imagine Titus singing evensong in G in Ely Cathedral. At a first hearing, many were inclined to sum him up in the single word "Hysterics!" but a closer following showed an earnestness and a consistency in his apparently *ex-tempore* invective. What it came to was, that his emotional idiosyncrasy and personality had become wholly and entirely steeped in the most unique religious system that is known to man. The beauty of Rome had eaten him up.

AN OPEN AIR SER

The occasion was the laying of the Found

AT BUNTINGFORD
stone of the new Church, May 16, 1914

III

DURING this time he lived in the Catholic Rectory, behind the great cedar tree that grows at the nave of the immense Gothic edifice which every traveller passes on his way from the station. Like a mighty riddle in stone, that church confronts each arriving freshman, and when he departs, forms his last glimpse of Cambridge. In this cathedral setting, Father Benson said his lonely Mass every day. His parochial work was confined to a few poor folk whom he visited and consoled in emergency, but his whole strength went into his fingers as a writer and into his tongue as a preacher. His mercurial development was fostered by alternate bursts of writing and of preaching. At times he became so possessed by his literary work that his characters were often more vivid to him than the men who lived in the house. Once he came downstairs in the greatest agitation, saying: "I am so frightened. There's a man committing

suicide in my room!" His imaginative power was constantly on the *qui vive*. Colour could produce the greatest effect upon him, not so much as colour, but as part of the general mysticism of things. He used to explain that the beauty of a cardinal's crimson did not lie in its imperial rouge, but in that "it represented the b-b-blood royal of Christ." Once after a Requiem service, at which a pall of black and yellow had been used, he was unable to say anything except, "Black and yellow—black and yellow," and from that impression his liturgico-mystical *Papers of a Pariah* had birth. He retired immediately to his room, and wrote the first chapter, which begins: "This morning I assisted at one of the most impressive dramas in the world—I mean the solemn Requiem Mass." And it was with the real impressions of the morning still in his mind that he wrote a few pages further on: "I despair of making clear, to those who cannot see it for themselves, the indescribably terrible combination of the colours of yellow and black, the deathliness of the contrast between flames and the unbleached wax from which they rise. . . ."

It was in his evenings that he could be generally found by inquirers. One

passage in *The Sentimentalists* memorises the echo of those moments: "A tram a hundred yards away boomed up from St. Andrew's Street, grew yet more resonant, punctuated by the horses' hoofs, and died away again up the Hill's Road. The clock chimed out its little plain-song melody. . . ." Anybody who ever visited Father Benson by night to discuss the immortality of the soul, or the liturgical colour of trout-flies, must remember the half-hourly tram and the quarterly chime. The horse-teams of Cambridge are already a thing of the past; but the peal of the bells in the Catholic Church will long ring as exquisitely as when they helped Father Benson to write his paragraphs against time. The room in which he worked finds its description, even unto *minutiæ*, in that occupied by Monsignor Yolland in *The Sentimentalists:* "A Louis Quinze table, two pairs of antlers over the fire, a Khalim hearth-rug, a grave leather-fringed bookshelf, filled with miscellaneous books—Stevenson, Henry Kingsley, some suspiciously clean editions of the Fathers of the Church, works on travel and sport—a pair of silver candle-sticks on a carved coffin-stool."

As he called it himself, it was "a palimpsest."

IV

IN these marked surroundings he received the worshipping and worshipful company of "Bensonians." Here they were guided spiritually and entertained mentally. Here they were themselves observed and sometimes reduced to literary shapes, which, whether composite or individual, by the time they reached his pages, were not without certain touches and changes, which it must be agreed always erred on the side of the benevolent as well as of the picturesque. But his Cambridge characters were nevertheless recognisable. "Algy Banister," the convert hero in *The Conventionalists*, wore in real life a Trinity Hall and not "a Third Trinity scarf." Benson had discovered in him that *rara avis* of the soul's flights—a Carthusian vocation—and compared him delightfully to "a delicate child that, unknown to himself, is heir to a dukedom." Though the story is imaginative, it may be added as a grain of fact that the hero did find the grace of conversion, though

not that of his spiritual dukedom. Of the identity of "Christopher Dell" in *The Sentimentalists*, there was never any doubt at Cambridge, for some of the familiar conversation of the prototype found its way, like hothouse flowers, between the pages. The setting was a figment, and there were intentional strokes in the draughtmanship sufficient to place it outside stark photography and within the kinder sphere of caricature. *The Sentimentalists* was a carefully broidered book, but *The Conventionalists* and *The Necromancers* were painted at full gallop.

The Necromancers represented a very vivid and deliberate side in Father Benson's outlook on the supernatural. His acceptance of the mystery of an unseen world comprised a frank admission of the unpleasantest truths of Spiritualism. He believed when he wrote—"Evil spirits are at us all the time, trying to get in at any crack they can find." His own experiences of psychical research were limited to the profitless *séances* he had attended as an undergraduate. As a Catholic he renounced Spiritualism, among other works of the Evil One, but his interest in its working did not cease, but culminated in the most gruesome of his novels. Psychical

research was to a large extent a Cambridge product. It represented a kind of perverted reaction from the atheistic physics which saturate so many of the best brains in the University. It was an attempt to probe the supernatural through other mediums than the theological. Had Father Benson gone on the Oxford Mission, he would probably have written *The Philosophers* instead, and *The Ritualists* in place of *The Conventionalists*. But Cambridge and Oxford are always poles apart. The former is the home of discovered causes, as the latter houses those that are lost. To Father Benson psychical research was associated, like Darwinism and Puritanism, with the Cambridge mentality. He was fond of stating in childlike tones the contrast between the two Universities: "It was Cambridge that produced the Reformers, and Oxford that b-b-burnt them!"

V

FATHER BENSON was never sorry to see agnostics and materialists take to psychical research as a hobby, in the hope that they would some time stumble against the supernatural. It was like blind men playing with fire. It was true that they might be burnt, but it was also possible that indirectly they might glimpse the light. Spiritualism offered a more exciting field to his pen than Anglican Orders. Anglican controversy became absurdly like peashooting an old lady who had lost her way, but to attack Spiritualism was to close with the Devil in person. For some time young dons and younger undergraduates had turned tables and twirled planchettes together. But it chanced that a climax was reached in October 1904, when a venerable college ghost was actually evoked and exorcised. For nine days the University gasped. Father Benson's subsequent interest in the matter was only equalled by his merriment on hearing that holy water blessed by the Anglican Vicar of St. C—— had been

H. E. CARDINAL BOURNE
GIVES THE LAST BLESSING, OCT. 23, 1914

used, but had not prevailed against the apparition. Panic-stricken youths afterwards supplied him with matter which developed into *The Necromancers*. Never were the symptoms of Spiritualism better described—the seeking for the sign—the grisly "watcher on the threshold," and the rest. "Cathcart," the advanced spiritualist, in his pages, who becomes a Catholic after ten years of "devilling," was no figment, but incidentally the only one of Benson's originals to be found in a current *Catholic Who's Who*. "He believes in the devil in quite an extraordinary way," was Benson's summing. What he realised was that the type of man who takes to Spiritualism is often religious, and spoils his chances of Catholicisation thereby. In a famous sentence he wrote: "To go to *séances* with good intentions is like holding a smoking concert in a powder-magazine on behalf of an orphan asylum."

The novels of the Cambridge period were successively directed against Æstheticism, Conventionalism, Spiritualism, and Materialism. These were the modern sins which seemed to cry for special castigation. In what may be held to be his masterpiece, *None other Gods*, he made light work of this world's Positions and Possessions, written as

such with capitals. The book opens with one of those atmospheric vignettes of which he was a master, describing the great court of Trinity when "the fitful splash and trickle of the fountain asserts itself clearly above the gentle rumble of Trinity Street." Frank Guiseley, the strangest and apparently most unmeaning character in the Bensonian gallery, successively undergraduate, convert, tramp, and mystic, whose life was only lived to complete his Failure (a word Benson could also write in capitals), was a composite in which loomed several men whose academical *floruit* was about 1905. Everybody who was at Cambridge that year will remember "the affair of the German prince travelling *incognito*, in which the mayor himself had been drawn," though it was actually Zanzibar's Sultan, who was then personated by a rollicking Trinity man. But the popular oarsman who suddenly announced his conversion to his startled friends was not, like Guiseley, at Trinity, but at the college next door. The interview with the Dean under circumstances of rigid politeness, the dislike for conventional or high-placed people, the total carelessness for success and the *camaraderie* for life's castaways, were all drawn from a unique and unforgettable personality.

When pressed, Father Benson would never admit that he purposely studied his friends, but his vivid subconsciousness reflected them whether he intended it or not. He never managed to describe himself, though he startled the critics of *The Conventionalists* by jumping into the book as a practical joke on them, and converting the hero in person! Perhaps Monsignor Dick Yolland, in the same book, was an approach to his real or imaginary self. His converse with Christopher Dell was not unlike Benson's with difficult undergraduates. Certainly his chivalrous defence and help of his wretched friend was typical of the human love and sympathy which went out so readily to all "Bensonians," conventional or the reverse, won or lost to Holy Church.

It was true that he did not attract the intellect or satisfy the common sense of the University, though *The Religion of the Plain Man* was a passionate plea addressed to a type whom he seldom touched. However, he was not the first teacher who gathered the wayward and wandering rather than the self-satisfied about him. The folk who composed his coterie were roving Ritualists, æsthetes with or without a moral sense, reformers of Church and State—in fact, all

the budding brotherhood of cranks, for each of whom he sought his proper niche within the multi-moulded fabric of the Church. Even the crazy King's-man who interrupted Benediction in the Catholic Church one evening with an appeal for brotherhood among Churches received more sympathy from Father Benson than from some of the Protestant pastors, whose flocks he had attempted to address on the same evening. "Peace, brother!" said Father Benson as he laid his hand on the shoulder of that talented fanatic, whom he only believed to be suffering from unconscious vocation to the Carmelite Order. All who were striving, if not for a new Heaven at least for a new Earth, found themselves in accord with Benson's working motto, that "Unconventionality is the spice of life." Certainly, whether he roused antagonism or devotion during his second coming to Cambridge, it may be said that, of all prophets and reformers who have ever preached to her, no one individual ever covered a more meteoric and ecstatic career in so short a time. He was there four years only. And now he has become a legend among some who were old when he came up. But for many whom he first met as undergraduates, he remains always the symbol of their spiritual youth and his.

ANECDOTES OF HUGH BENSON

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BY RICHARD HOWDEN

I

ALTHOUGH in conversation Hugh Benson had a stammer, yet in the pulpit he had not the slightest hesitation; in fact, his eloquence was so tremendous and his flow of perfect language so continuous, that his listeners came away overwhelmed by the torrent of words. He always spoke and preached extemporarily, although he made copious and profuse notes of his sermons and speeches beforehand. On only one occasion, so he told me, did his eloquence fail him. He was preaching, as an Anglican, in some church, I think in Brighton, at the time of the fatal illness of his father, the Archbishop of Canterbury. In the middle of his sermon, he felt himself entirely unable to proceed; all thread of his discourse had gone, and after a few stammered sentences

he was forced to leave the pulpit, as he was quite incapable of finishing. He was amazed to find that the moment the power of speech left him was the moment his father died. One day, after I had been present in Westminster Cathedral, where thousands had listened to him spell-bound, I asked him what it felt like to stand up in the pulpit and face that sea of eager, upturned faces, knowing it was because he was preaching that this enormous crowd had collected. He answered with characteristic curtness, "Oh! all right; I was in an awful funk, and I preached a rotten sermon. Let's go to lunch!"

II

HE was his greatest critic of all he did, and I think the only work accomplished by him which really satisfied him, was his book, *Richard Raynal, Solitary*. He considered it his finest work; he wrote it in three weeks; and, with his love for the mystical, he was convinced he wrote it under inspiration. He wrote his books, pamphlets, and lectures with extraordinary rapidity, and with amazing concentration. Entering his room with some message while he was engaged in writing, I have had to call him several times before I was able to elicit an answer. He was very fond of reading aloud to any friend some part of whatever he was composing—a chapter from a new book, or some article—and always begged for a frank criticism. I can see him now, legs crossed under a rather ancient cassock, stammering out a story, interjected with puffs of cigarette smoke, and finishing up with his enthusiastic: "It isn't bad, is it?" or, "My dear, what do

you think of this? This is r-rather r-ripping." In other respects, too, he was really like an enthusiastic schoolboy. I remember he lunched with me on his return from his first American tour, where his ardent American admirers presented him with a gold watch and chain, gold cigarette-case, and some other gifts of appreciation. These he produced one after the other, with the air of a delighted boy showing you his presents from a rich uncle!

He was so utterly devoid of any kind of "side." He would work in his garden at Hare Street, in grey flannel trousers and the striped cricket shirt he had won for "College" when at Eton; and whoever came, be it cardinal, lady, or layman, all were received then and there, and carried off in enthusiastic haste to be shown the latest improvements to the chapel, or house, or garden. The Hare Street house was entirely like him and of him. Every corner showed his versatility. Here was a bedroom, the walls hung with fantastic weird tapestry, which he had designed and made and put up with his own hands. Again, some carved oaken panels which he himself had carved. His bed was Jacobean, with blue hangings and the emblems of

the Passion on the four posts; the staircase panelled and carved with heraldic and sacred designs; the chapel—the Mecca of his love—overflowing with carvings, statues, fashioned by his own hands. The rather rough screen, and choir stalls, made out of odd pieces of oak he had picked up, the organ loft, containing the harmonium presented to him by an eminent English comedian (one of his many converts), all were fashioned and erected with the help of his wonderful man of all work, and of any friend who was staying with him. He who never knew what it was to have an idle moment pressed into service of some kind all who were with him. I have known him in one day write a score of letters, finish a novel, shoot with a neighbouring squire, carve a panel, play the piano, and smoke—well, *how* many cigarettes!—he smoked feverishly and incessantly—and yet, with all this, he placed the exact performance of his religious duties before everything else.

His Mass he said at eight; breakfast in silence was at nine, after which he dealt with his correspondence, which was tremendous: I have known him to have fifty letters by the morning post. This task accomplished, he would write at some

novel or article, then go into the chapel to say the Little Hours before luncheon at one. Luncheon was usually taken in silence unless there was some stranger whose presence needed the relaxation of this rule. After luncheon, manual labour in the garden or about the house, and the carving, painting or tapestry-making was done. Tea at four, and then writing again until dinner at eight, which was not taken in silence. That over, all would adjourn to the delightful oak-floored parlour, where, amid cigarette smoke, he would read either extracts from the novel he was working at, or from some other book, or perhaps talk in his entrancing manner about some psychic problem which was interesting him. Then the chapel bell would ring, and all would go and thank God for a day so happily spent. I can see him now, kneeling very erect and intent, reading with extraordinary rapidity the Night Prayers, his only light a wooden standard candlestick placed close to him on the red-tiled uneven floor. The Prayers finished, he would kneel on, his eyes fixed on the Tabernacle, and you could positively feel him beseeching Heaven on behalf of the many souls under his care, and imploring help to carry out to the uttermost his spiritual motto: "God's Holy Will be

done." He certainly practised what he preached. The keynote, so to speak, of his life was his favourite expression, "Nothing matters in this world, my dear, except the doing of God's Will," and he most willingly and humbly resigned himself to whatever he felt was the Divine Will for him.

III

AT the beginning of the European War, he offered his services to the War Office as an army chaplain. To his unusually highly strung and nervous temperament there was nothing more repugnant to him, or terrifying, than having to face the horrors of the battlefield. "I had a beastly day," he wrote to me. "I volunteered, heard nothing, then suddenly had a wire asking me where I was, and where a letter would find me; and I was convinced it was from the War Office. Well, it was; but it wasn't about that. But for twenty-four hours I was terrified, made my last testament, wrote letters. But I didn't really mind, because I *willed* to go." And so it was all through his life; he indeed might be called the Apostle of the Will.

He loved all religious, but especially the Carthusians; he made many retreats at the Charterhouse at Parkminster in Sussex, and several of his spiritual children have

tried their vocations at that haven of rest. His own house at Hare Street was chaffingly termed by some of his friends "The halfway house to Parkminster," several men who had lived with him having gone on to test their vocation for self-oblivion among the followers of St. Bruno. Some accused him, inevitably, but unjustly, of being too much of an idealist in dealing with the spiritual life of others. If he put before his spiritual children the great heights attainable by the soul even whilst under the bondage of the flesh, he tempered these aspirations both for himself and for them with healthy and practical common sense. He had that entirely delightful yet uncommon combination of the practical man of the world and the dreamer of dreams. When he stayed at Cambridge he joined the undergraduates at the bathing place, swimming and diving like an exultant boy; or, again, on his holiday he would intrepidly climb a Swiss mountain—and an hour later would be weaving a romance with picturesque phrase and mystical expression. He preached his famous course of sermons "The Religion of the Plain Man" at the Sunday evening service at Cambridge, and crowds of members of the University came to hear him. He was a favourite guest in

College Common Rooms among the dons, and also an ever welcomed partaker of undergraduate hospitality, quite as happy to be discussing the relative values of motor cars with an exquisite in Trinity, as in arguing some historical problem with some eminent professor, or, again, convincing an aspiring senior wrangler that there was something higher and more important than higher mathematics.

Then and always Robert Hugh Benson's manners were delightfully free, charming and courteous. He had that rare gift of making you feel in conversation that what you were saying was of real moment to him; so he gave you his full attention, and his kind and constant "How interesting" put you at your ease. Yet he did not suffer fools gladly, if he felt they were foolish through their own wilful stupidity or conceit. He loathed "side" in any form, especially what he termed "spiritual side." I can honestly and truthfully say I never heard him say an unkind word about anyone; it was always "A nice man that." At the children's parties held at Hare Street his delight was to invent some new kind of game for them. Well I remember the merriest of Christmas teas he arranged for his little ward, with candles, Christmas

cake, and Santa Claus impersonated by his dear friend and secretary, Dr. Sessions. Animals he loved. He was a good rider, and an excellent shot, and, of course, he enjoyed to its full a motor ride. For whatever he did, he did with extraordinary keenness and pleasure, doing all things for the greater glory of God.

NOTES

I

MR. SHANE LESLIE, whose personal memories of Mgr. Benson's Cambridge Apostolate are here first printed, contributed to the *Tablet* (31st October, 1914), anonymously, an article from which we quote these passages :

WE cannot imagine he was not glad and interested at the prospect of death, though he may have suffered a slight regret (shared by all his readers) that it was not granted to him to describe the supreme experience which biology calls death, but theology speaks of only in terms of life.

AT Eton he won the prize for a poem on Father Damien. It was his only achievement at the school where his name, cut on the Fourth Form panels, was until recently pointed out to American visitors with the mysterious explanation, "The Priest!" At Eton he ambitioned to enter the Indian Civil. The Xavier lay buried in the Clive—the missionary in the adventurer. When the Divine Adventure offered itself later, all his desires were fulfilled.

SUMMARY and parallels fail in the case of Robert Hugh Benson. He stood in religious symbolism to his time. He could not have been a Victorian. He was of the *commencement de siècle*, and nothing else. He was an ecclesiastical Winston Churchill, to whom he was curiously comparable, even to the stutter, commanding and conquering men's attention against their will. In each case a father's son made his father memorable for his son. Both Archbishop Benson and Lord Randolph Churchill had given the systems with which their names are perpetuated their most famous *mots*; and the sons reversed their utterances by their personal achievement. By a supreme *peripateia* both passed over to the rival camps, and both claimed in their writings that in doing what they ought not to have done as sons, they as heirs had found the only use and outlet for their fathers' legacies.

II

WHEN photography was a newer art, the unused sitter might be pardoned a self-consciousness which familiarity with the camera has dispelled. Cardinal Manning used to say that the time when the cap of the camera was removed was the only time when a man (with an emphasis on the sitter's musculinity) felt a fool. Of the later generation of men, who perhaps feel less foolish than bored, Monsignor Benson made a good sitter, perfectly natural in his

expression, neither inanely smiling nor of so unwonted a gravity as to be enjoined to say, like Little Dorrit, "Papa, potatoes, prunes, and prison," in order to give the mouth a sweet and smiling version. These photographs recall in some particulars an even more meticulous portrait — that of Father Campion in *The Guide Book and the Star:*

WELL, first, he's a most boyish-looking person for his age—he's thirty-nine, Dick told me so—but he looks about twenty-two. He's medium height, and blond, with straight butter-coloured hair (no doubt his mother calls it golden) which needs cutting. His face is rather full and more oval than square. There's no loose skin on it. He has light blue, shining eyes, badly shaped, and with no depth in them. They are a little prominent. His nose makes his whole face youthful. It's short, aquiline, and has arched nostrils. His mouth is confusing—a fascinating mouth. It's tender and dogged; sensitive and yet shapeless; emotional but rigid. The upper-lip is like that of a shy child; the under-lip suggests an aggressive despot. It juts out a little, as if there were a lump of sugar between it and the gum. It's the mouth of a man who could bite; but he'd bite with tears in his eyes.

THE expression of the whole face is odd. You know what importance I attach to expression. His is a kind of suppressed eagerness

which seems to vary either to suppression minus the eagerness, when his face becomes mask-like, or to eagerness minus the suppression, when he lights up with a white-hot keenness that arouses attention. However, the normal expression strikes a happy mean; neither cold nor hot, but a kind of pink temperature.

HE has a habit of thrusting out his chin, and he stammers a little: not apologetically or painfully, as most people do, but quite cheerfully. He doesn't mind at all. "Let the conversation w-w-wait until he's g-got the w-word out."

* * * * * *

IN the same brilliant and Bensonian little book, Mrs. Lindsay's heroine brings against an imaginary author ("D. L. Lawley") the charges pressed home, on occasion, to the author of *The Sentimentalists;* and—what makes these charges most noticeable here—her "Father Campion" is himself heard in reply:

AS I came home, I overtook Father Campion. He was leaning on a gate, staring out over a wilderness of ploughed fields which stretched away to the horizon like a crinkled brown sea. He turned when I came up to him, and we walked back together. I told him that I had been reading *The Fishermen*, and he asked me what I thought of it. I said what I have said to you. He listened with a curious little air of intense interest which

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he always wears when anybody is talking to him. It makes one expand like a sponge. When I said that I thought there was something horribly off the straight line in the way Sidney Fairfax was deliberately marked down and inveigled and coerced, he said that he quite agreed with me, which completely threw me off my bearings. As he was looking at me just then he saw it, and asked whether that surprised me. I said that it did: that, considering he was a Roman Catholic priest it sounded disloyal; and then it was his turn to look surprised, and he asked me what on earth I meant, and disloyal to whom or to what?

HE thought I was mixing up two separate ideas; the Catholic Church and the people in it; and, although Catholics owed the most absolute loyalty to the Church, he wasn't aware that they owed any special loyalty to each other, beyond a natural loyalty if they happened to be personal friends. He added that there was every distinction between the Church and the people in it. It was by no means one and the same thing.

FATHER CAMPION said one thing just before we got home that struck me as very true. He said that if there was one thing he disbelieved in, it was controversy on subjects of religion. That if people were interested and wanted to know things they could always find a way for themselves: they would either read or ask; and if they were not interested, then it was just confounded impertinence to cram such very personal matters down their throats.

III

THE allusion made to Monsignor Benson as an apostle of the Will of Man may be further illustrated in his own Preface to Miss Mary Samuel Daniel's intimate story, *Choice:*

THE most inalienable gift that the rational soul possesses is that of Choice. All other faculties may wax and wane; the intellect may be now illuminated, now obscured; there are moments when it thinks itself capable of solving all mysteries; there are moments when it cannot grasp even a truism. So with the emotions—the tide of feeling rises and falls with health, circumstances, companionships; it runs dry in the presence of those whom it loves; it rises to the brim in solitude. But the will is always itself—acting and choosing—and cannot cease: there is no such thing as indecisiveness in reality—it is no less than a rapid alternation of decisions. Ultimately, therefore, the rational soul becomes, not what it necessarily understands, nor what it superficially loves—but that which it chooses.

CONFRONTED by that Phenomenon which confronts always, sooner or later, in our own country and generation, all who are fearlessly searching for truth—the Phenomenon of Catholicism. At first she is attracted by it; she has escaped the entanglements of controversy, and the persuasion of relatives, and the drag of old prejudice; and she becomes aware, directly and over-

whelmingly, that its very overpoweringness is to her an argument against its truth. *How can such things be true?* . . . As she proceeds further she finds much in the system that repels her; truth, if this is truth, presents to her brutal, fantastic and even childishly ugly aspects. Neither head nor heart seem consistent with themselves; now she thinks she understands; now she knows she does not: now she almost hates the Christian Creed; now she thinks that the sorrow of the Cross and the broken Body of Christ alone promise help and consolation. Yet all the while, it is in her Will, though she does not know it—not in her head or heart that the scene of conflict lies. She believes that she must be "true to herself," and does not understand that she must "deny herself," if she would be true to God. To and fro, then, she moves, till it seems as if there were no possibility of decision. Then—she decides. *Her whole character moves, and not a part of it only.*

IV

MONSIGNOR BENSON had a handwriting as proper to himself as was Dickens's handwriting to Dickens. Both avoided the slovenliness to which Bulwer Lytton long ago lamented that novelists must descend. Shakespeare, we are now assured by all uncured Baconians, could not, as a mere matter of mechanism, have written all his plays, so laborious was his cal-

ligraphy; and similarly Monsignor Benson's inevitable flourishes might be urged against the possibilities of that unfailing pile of manuscript on manuscript.

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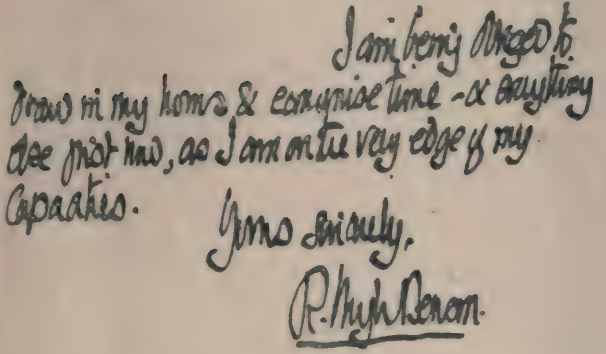
I am being obliged to draw in my horns & economise time - & everything else just now, as I am on the very edge of my capacities.

Yours sincerely,

R. Hugh Benson.

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The sentence here reproduced (a little "smaller than life") is taken from a letter written about a year ago: "I am being obliged to draw in my horns, and economise time and everything else just now, as I am on the very edge of my capacities." At unbroken speed he remained at that perilous pitch until the inevitable catastrophe came which was by only him undreaded.

V

WHEN, in 1890, Robert Hugh Benson entered Trinity College, Cambridge, there entered also another future novelist, Mr. Archibald Marshall, whose memories of his old friend, published in the *Cornhill Magazine*, include a little passage of colour —even the red of Rome. The freshman, who still looked like a schoolboy, with "a tangled mop of fair hair, quick stammering speech, and a shy but attractive manner," and who "always walked very fast and appeared to be busy," thought even then that "it would be nice to write stories and get money for them"; but "he said that what he would really like to be was a Cardinal."

HE thought, too, even then, about psychic phenomena, purposely occupying rooms in which a demented man had shot himself, in the hope that he might see his ghost. Once, when riding with his friend through Vauxhall, "Hugh discovered himself to be on fire from a pipe he had put alight into his pocket"—an almost Francis-Thompsonian reminiscence. But if he had his absent-mindednesses, he

had also his intentnesses. He argued hotly. In the smoking-room at Addington "sometimes the discussion waxed rather warm. Hugh and one of the chaplains once ended by falling out rather seriously. The next day Hugh went away for a few days with the breach still unhealed." When he returned, the chaplain admitted his own wrongness, and said he had bought Hugh a box of beautiful cigarettes to make up. Then a repentant smile broke out over the chaplain's face as he added, "But they were so good that I'm afraid I have smoked them all"—not the only occasion when Hugh learned the useful lesson to take the will for the deed.

MR. MARSHALL bears an outsider's witness to the benignant development of his friend when and after he reached the home of his soul. The disputant in him, fortunately, did not die; but it was mellowed, and, being ripened, also sweetened. One of the last letters Mr. Marshall had from him, not many months before his death, was in acknowledgment of a story of religious experience, alien to his own. "His letter began, 'Your book has come, and I like it *enormously*. It is gentle and Christian and

interesting and happy.' I am quite sure that fifteen years ago he would have argued hotly with me about it." In recent intercourse, therefore, the friends became nearer :—"I found him an even more delightful companion than he was during the years of which I have written," and what had vanished with his Anglicanism was "a certain friction that made itself felt before Hugh finally found what I believe to have been his true vocation in life. He had a very dominating will, and had not always been easy to live with; but he seemed to me to have acquired, of late years, a self-reliance that was very different in its effects from the opinionativeness that had stood in its place before. He had the most lovable qualities, and they seemed to shine out in him more and more each time that we came together."

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